

King: We Believe

Rights leader's son backs assassin's claim of innocence

By Michael Dorman
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

In a nationally televised confrontation laden with high drama, a son of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. flatly asked James Earl Ray yesterday: "Did you kill my father?"

Ray, appearing thin and frail from a deadly liver ailment, replied, "No, I didn't."

Dexter King, 36, told Ray, "I believe you, and my family believes you."

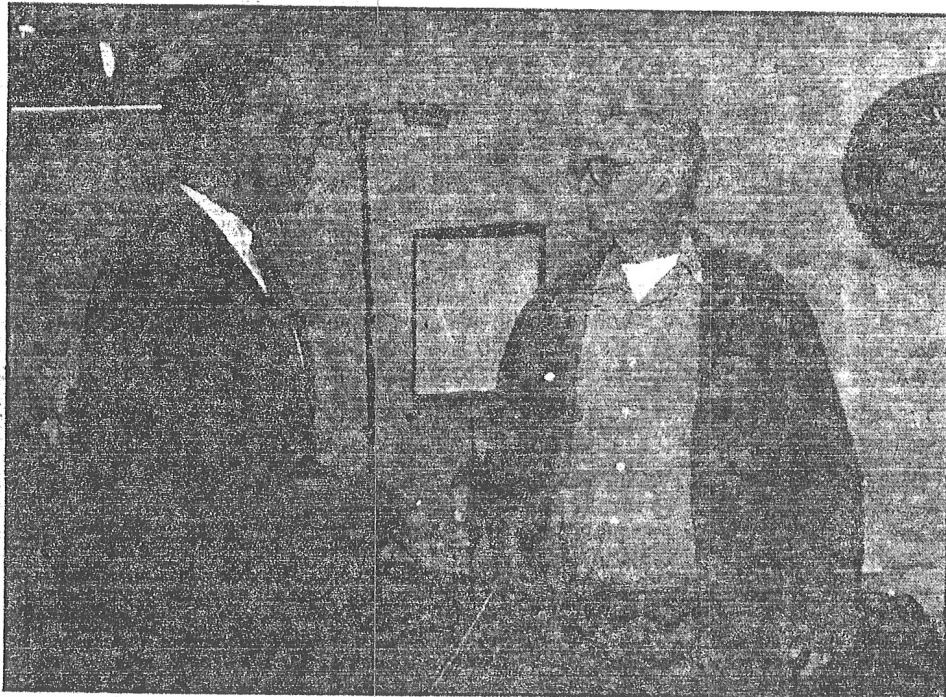
The meeting came before a room full of reporters and television cameras at the Lois DeBerry Special Needs Center, a prison hospital in Nashville, Tenn., where Ray is serving a 99-year sentence. He pleaded guilty in 1969 to the assassination of King but now is seeking a trial — claiming he was a mere dupe in the murder.

His meeting with Dexter King was the latest development in the case in recent months.

King and his family revealed last month that they were supporting Ray's appeal for a full trial. But they said at the time that they did not know whether Ray was innocent or guilty. King's statement yesterday that he and his family believed Ray's claim came as a sharp departure, which King did not explain.

Ray, 69, is awaiting the results of a court hearing last month in which his attorneys pressed for a full trial.

He was brought to the room yesterday in a wheel-



Dexter King, son of Martin Luther King Jr., with James Earl Ray after meeting yesterday.

AP Photo

chair. He seemed to ramble at times and stumble over his words. At the outset, Ray told King: "I had nothing to do with shooting your father." But then, and later in the meeting, he added qualifications to his denial, telling King, "You'll have to make your own conclusions," and that the question of his guilt was "hard to answer."

King told him: "We are going to do everything in

our power to make sure that justice will prevail. I guess in some strange way our destinies, that of my father and that of yourself, somehow got tied up together. We still don't feel as a family that we have all of the questions answered."

Many questions about the case have been stirred by Ray himself. After the 1968 assassination in Memphis, Ray pleaded guilty to single-handedly murdering King. In return, he was spared a possible death sentence and given the 99-year term. Then he recanted his confession and said he was involved with a mystery man known to him only as "Raoul" in a conspiracy to murder King. Later, he refined the story to claim that Raoul actually had duped him into participating in the plot. No one has ever produced credible evidence that Raoul exists.

Physical evidence in the case pointed directly to Ray. He admitted he owned the murder weapon and his fingerprints were found on it. He left other fingerprints and possessions traceable to him at the scene. And it was known he stalked the civil rights leader before the assassination.

But at yesterday's meeting, arranged by Dexter King and Ray's lawyers, Ray said a great deal of misinformation has been spread about the case.

"The only thing that should be relevant is the facts of the case," he told King. "Maybe you can come to your own conclusions. I think it could be done today. I don't think it could be done thirty years ago."

Newsday
3/28/97